

"THINGS TO THINK ABOUT; THINGS TO PRACTICE"

I. Introduction

- A. Nutritionists tell us, "You are what you eat," and computer programmers go by the dictum, "Garbage in, garbage out."
1. In a similar sense, what you think about shapes who you are.
 2. If you frequently think of things that are sinful, you will be more inclined to act in sinful ways.
 3. If your thinking is dominated by escapist fantasies, you will live in denial of reality.
 4. If your mind is consumed by things that worry or upset you, you will be an anxious or angry person.
 5. Closely related to this is the fact that what you do reveals who you are.
 6. Jesus said as much when he taught that "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45)
- B. There is a vital connection between your thoughts, your life, and your relationship with God.
1. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." (Rom. 8:6)
 2. Every Christian experiences an internal battle between the Spirit and the flesh.
 3. And the principle battleground in this warfare is your mind.

4. As we study these verses from Philippians this evening, we will consider what they teach us about the relationship between our thinking, our practices, and God's presence in our lives.

II. What to Think About

- A. We begin by looking at verse 8, where the focus is upon the things we think about.
 1. There are three parts to this verse.
 2. First, Paul lists six qualities.
 3. Then he summarizes these qualities with the statements "if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise."
 4. And then he instructs us to think about these qualities.
 5. This is not just a mental exercise.
 6. As we have just said, the things that we think about give shape to the way we live our lives.
 7. The mind plays a crucial role in the Christian life.
 8. As one commentator notes, "Just as a carnal mind is the surest passport to the downward path, so a mind drilled in the things of which God approves is the steadiest way into practical holiness."
[Motyer, 212]
- B. The first of the six qualities that Paul instructs us to think about is "whatever is true."
 1. For many in our society, truth only exists at an individual level.

2. This is the mindset being expressed when people say, "Live your truth."
 3. Those who embrace this way of thinking are undermining the concept of truth.
 4. Truth is by definition that which conforms to reality.
 5. To say that whatever I deem to be "my truth" trumps reality is to do away with the notion that there is such a thing as truth.
 6. In a general way, God makes the truth known to all people through the light of nature, though the knowledge of this truth is distorted by sin.
 7. God makes the truth more fully known in the Scriptures, and by the power of the Holy Spirit he enables us to understand and submit to this truth.
 8. We need to fill our minds with the truth of Scripture, because it is God's sanctifying power in our lives.
 9. As Jesus prayed in John 17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." (v. 17)
- C. The next quality we should think about is "whatever is honorable."
1. There is a lot that is dishonorable and undignified in our culture.
 2. This makes it all the more important for us to fill our minds with noble thoughts.
 3. Think about things that are dignified, things that are lofty, things that promote reverence and respect.
 4. The easiest way to do this is to fill your mind with thoughts of the Lord, whose honor and greatness is beyond compare.

- D. The next two qualities that Paul mentions are “whatever is just” and “whatever is pure.”
1. These are closely related to each other.
 2. To say that something is just is to say that it is in accordance with God’s standard of righteousness.
 3. To say that something is pure is to say that it has not been tainted by evil.
 4. It goes without saying that there is plenty of injustice and impurity in our society.
 5. But we should not forget that these vices afflict our own hearts as well.
 6. We often act out of self-interest rather than out of a commitment to what is right.
 7. And our hearts are often divided rather than purely devoted to God.
 8. Moreover, the harder we strive after righteousness and moral purity, the more aware we become of our failings.
 9. C.S. Lewis put it well when he said that “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” [*Mere Christianity*, 142]
 10. Because of indwelling sin, our hearts are still drawn to that which is impure and unjust.
 11. This keeps us ever mindful of our need for Christ.
 12. We need to cultivate an appetite for righteousness in our hearts, and the way to do so is to fill our minds with thoughts of things that are just and pure.

- E. The last two qualities on Paul's list are also closely related to each other: "whatever is lovely" and "whatever is commendable."
1. We need to set our minds on things that are beautiful, things that are praiseworthy, things that are good.
 2. We have to be intentional about this, especially in our day and age.
 3. Peoples' attentions today are easily captivated by things that are trivial, flashy, faddish, scandalous, and vulgar.
 4. This is why it is important for Christians to be cultivating our aesthetic sense.
 5. The most commendable and admirable things in life require time and attention in order to be properly appreciated.
 6. And such things are worth learning to appreciate because everything that is lovely in this world points us to the unparalleled loveliness of God.
 7. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, "The beauty of trees, plants and flowers, with which God has bespangled the face of the earth, is delightful; the beautiful frame of the body of man, especially in its perfection, is astonishing; the beauty of the moon and stars is wonderful; the beauty of the highest heaven is transcendent; the excellency of angels and the saints in light is very glorious; but it is all deformity and darkness in comparison of the brighter glories and beauties of the Creator of all." [cited in Witmer, *Mindscape*, 106]
- F. The basic point that Paul is making in verse 8 is that we need to be careful about what we let our minds dwell on.
1. This is not an easy thing for us to do.
 2. It is hard to control your thought-life.
 3. Your thoughts are secret.

4. No one else will know if you let your mind think about the wrong things.
5. But remember this: your character is being formed by the things that you think about.
6. There are some things that are not good for you to think about.
7. There are some things that you need to avoid being consumed by.
8. And the way to take your mind off of these things is to set your mind on things that are excellent and praiseworthy.
9. This is the Bible's pattern for our sanctification.
10. As Paul says in Romans 12, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

III. What to Put into Practice

- A. This brings us to verse 9, where Paul talks about our practices.
 1. He writes, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me — practice these things."
 2. This is similar to what Paul said back in chapter 3, where he instructed the Philippians to "join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."
 3. There are three things to note about the charge that Paul gives here in verse 9.
 4. First, he talks about things that the Philippians have learned and received from him.

5. These are things that Paul *taught* them about the Christian life.
 6. This tells us that we learn how to practice our faith by listening to sound biblical teaching about the life of faith.
 7. You don't just automatically know how to be a Christian.
 8. It is something that you have to learn.
- B. The second thing to point out is that Paul calls his readers' attention to the things that they have seen in him.
1. This is referring to Paul's example, to the kind of life he lived as a Christian.
 2. Paul was no hypocrite.
 3. There was a connection between his words and his life.
 4. He practiced what he preached.
 5. This is why his life was an example for other Christians to follow.
 6. As I said in an earlier sermon in this series, we need to see examples of faithful Christian living.
 7. And I am not just talking about famous Christians.
 8. We also need to pay attention to examples of faithfulness in the lives of ordinary Christians.
 9. Let the example of the faithful Christians around you flesh out the Christian life for you, and you set an example for others in your life.
- C. The third thing to note is that Paul wants the Philippians to practice the things that they have learned from him and seen in him.

1. This tells us that the Christian life is not just a matter of the heart or the mind.
 2. It is more than just assenting to a set of beliefs.
 3. Those things certainly are a part of the Christian life, but it cannot end there.
 4. Christianity is a religion that needs to be practiced.
 5. There is a way of living out the Christian faith.
 6. Don't let your faith be something that is entirely internal.
 7. Put it into practice by doing the things that Christians are called to do.
- D. After giving these instructions about our thinking and our practices, Paul then talks about God's presence.
1. He says, "and the God of peace will be with you."
 2. The word "and" is important here.
 3. It tells us that this is the consequence that will follow if we heed the instructions that Paul sets forth here.
 4. In other words, if we think about these qualities, and if practice our faith, God will be with us.
- E. Of course, this does not mean that God is not with us at those times when we fail in our thought-life or in our practice of the faith.
1. Our Lord has promised us: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb. 13:5)
 2. And Jesus said: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt. 28:20)

3. God is always with his people — even when our thoughts stray, even when we fail to practice godliness.
 4. Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- F. In light of this, we have to conclude that Paul’s statement at the end of verse 9 — “the God of peace will be with you” — is not about the objective reality of God’s presence with his people.
1. That is something that can never change once you place your faith in Christ.
 2. Instead, Paul is referring to our subjective experience of God’s presence.
 3. This is something that can change in a believer’s life.
 4. There can be times when we feel God’s presence very strongly, and there can be times when we feel forsaken by God.
 5. God may sometimes bring us through spiritually dark seasons for reasons that have nothing to do with anything we have done.
 6. He may do so to test and perfect our faith, or to show us our weakness and frailty in order to remind us of the sufficiency of his grace.
 7. On the other hand, there can be times when a feeling of spiritual desertion is brought on by our sins and failings.
 8. That being the case, this passage gives us a general principle for how we can deepen our experience of God’s peace-giving presence.
 9. The point that Paul is making is that the more you think about things that are praiseworthy, and the more you put your faith into

practice, the more aware you will be that the God of peace really is with you.

10. And notice how this compares with what Paul said back in verse 7: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
11. Not only are we promised the peace of God, we are also promised the God of peace himself.

IV. Conclusion

- A. As you look back over this past week, I am sure that you can point to a number of thoughts that you had that were neither excellent nor praiseworthy.
 1. And I am sure that you can point to a number of ways in which you failed to practice the things you have learned and received and heard and seen about the Christian life.
 2. This problem is not going to go away, at least not as long as you remain in this world.
 3. The Christian life is a lifelong battle, as the desires of the flesh war against the desires of the Spirit.
- B. But don't let this discourage you.
 1. Keep fighting the good fight.
 2. When false, impure, disturbing, or unworthy thoughts arise in your mind, remind yourself that you have been given the mind of Christ, and think of nobler things.
 3. When your practice of the faith seems so lame, remember that it is by Jesus's obedience that you are made righteous, and strive all the more to live for the One who for your sake died and was raised.

4. Above all, remember that Jesus will never abandon you.